

International cooperation in aligning drug policies with Sustainable Development Goals

Key messages from the International conference organised by the Pompidou Group of the Council of Europe and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mexico 30 - 31 October 2019, Mexico City

Drug Policy Challenges

Coherence between different sectors of drug policies is imperative for effectiveness and cost efficiency. Coherence in policies is achieved when different policies complement or support each other, or, at a minimum, do not undermine one another or cancel each other out. At best, policy coherence creates synergies between different policies and leverages capacity to realise a common goal.

In drug policy implementation, as in general, multi-agency strategies and multi stakeholder cooperation face barriers that make their implementation and successful operation difficult. Incompatibilities of rules and regulations governing the work of different stakeholders, protective legislation that safeguards civil rights, confidentiality interests of law-enforcement agencies, mutual prejudices of the stakeholders involved, different communication cultures, varying decision-making procedures, are all examples of such barriers.

Economic crisis and financial constraints affect all determinants of health, such as nutrition, housing, education and employment, further exacerbating existing inequalities and leading to deterioration of physical and mental health as well as stunted growth in children. Such effects predominantly impact vulnerable groups and bring about an increase in drug addictions.

Discrimination towards people who use drugs results in stigma, social exclusion and further aggravation of the problems they face. The political and societal acceptance of addiction as a health condition, no different from other chronic diseases, is severely undermined by prejudice, false assumptions and social inequalities leading to stigmatization and discrimination.

Good governance

Evaluation is an integral part of a good governance approach to public policy. This principle applies equally to the component of drug policies. To evaluate and improve drug policy, it is imperative to know and take note of all possible effects of different interventions and actions.

All policies, regardless of purpose or intention, come with a risk of unintended consequences. Unintended consequences are of policy relevance for two reasons: first, they should be taken into account when policy decisions are made and second, their adverse effects should be minimized when possible. In order to accomplish this, one needs to identify these consequences and identify who are affected. In addition, possible interventions that can be implemented to reduce their extent and negative effects should be actively sought.

Monitoring and data collection are crucial for the design of any policy and the evaluation of the effectiveness. Data collection and estimation methods with further methodological developments are needed for prioritizing and targeting drug policy interventions, efficient allocation of resources and measuring the impact of drug policies.

Where necessary, urgent action must be taken based on indicators showing changes in the drug situation and its consequences. In some countries there is already sufficient evidence that justifies action before a serious deterioration of individual and public health indices as well as loss of human lives.

Evidence based best practices on optimizing cost effectiveness in policy implementation should be used to address pressing budgetary constraints. Innovative solutions to providing essential services at manageable costs should be encouraged and explored.

Human rights and drug policy

Drug policy and human rights are inter-linked. Under the United Nations Conventions, it is the obligation of States to protect and promote the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms, in particular the right to life and human dignity, the right to health and equitable access to quality health care services, the prohibition of any type of discrimination, as well as the right of children to be protected from narcotic drugs and psychoactive substances. Member States must ensure that drug policies do not lead to unintended consequences that adversely affect the enjoyment of these rights.

Insufficient attention to human rights can lead to unintended consequences such as harassment and violence, arbitrary detention, disproportionate sentencing and incarceration, absence of judicial guarantees, discrimination, gender inequality, erosion of the right to health, and impinge on a person's dignity or otherwise amount to inhuman or degrading treatment. In case of interference with the enjoyment of fundamental rights, the State is also under an obligation to provide adequate and effective mechanisms for redress.

Balancing public safety and the individual's rights

The challenge for governments is to ensure that their drug policies are effective in the guaranteeing of the fundamental rights outlined above, and also effective in meeting their aims of controlling and reducing harmful drug use.

This means that implementing concurrent drug control and human rights obligations involves a fair balance between the demands of the general interest of the community and the protection of the individual's fundamental rights.